

**SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT:
A SYSTEMIC VIEW OF WHAT'S
MISSING AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**

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**S Y S T E M S
T H I N K E R S
I N A C T I O N**

**A Field Guide for Effective
Change Leadership in Education**

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School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students. But when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.

Carnegie Task Force on Education, 1989

If we want to bring . . . quality, equity, and new life to our system—we must trust in a vision and a process of change.

Dwight Allen, 1993

Concerns are increasing about the degree to which achievement test score averages are plateauing and the failure of current reforms to make a significant dent in the achievement gap. Yet the call for leaving no child behind continues to stress the same formula for school improvement—higher standards and greater accountability, improved

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curricula and instruction, increased discipline, reduced school violence, and on and on. None of it means much if such calls do not result in substantive systemic changes in the many schools where too many students do not have an equitable opportunity to succeed. Moreover, if the intent is to leave no child behind, essential improvements in how schools address barriers to learning and teaching must occur in all schools. And there is growing recognition that effective change on a large scale cannot even be approximated as long as systemwide change continues to be treated as an afterthought. Each of these matters represents fundamental systemic concerns that require greater attention from policy makers, education leaders and staff, and researchers.

In discussing these concerns, our focus first is on highlighting the chaos related to what schools do currently to deal with learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Then from the perspective of addressing barriers to learning and teaching, we clarify what is missing in school-improvement planning. We move on to outline the type of comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated system designed to fill the gaps. Finally, we briefly highlight considerations related to making systemic changes that are sustainable and that can be implemented throughout a school district.

Before proceeding, however, we should clarify use of the term *systemic change* in the context of this chapter. Our focus is on district and school organization, operations, and the networks that shape decision making about fundamental changes and subsequent implementation. From this perspective, systemic change involves modifications that amount to a cultural shift in institutionalized values (i.e., reculturalization). For interventionists, the problem is that the greater the distance and dissonance between the current culture of schools and intended school improvements, the more difficult it is to successfully accomplish major systemic changes.

WHAT SCHOOLS DO TO ADDRESS STUDENT PROBLEMS: WHY IS IT SO FRAGMENTED?

Over the years, awareness of the many external and internal factors that are barriers to learning and teaching has given rise to legal mandates

and a variety of counseling, psychological, and social support programs and to initiatives for school–community collaborations. In the United States, enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 accelerated awareness of the need to attend to such matters.

As a result, a cursory look at most school districts finds an extensive range of programs and services oriented to students' needs and problems in schools. Encompassed are efforts to reduce barriers directly and to create buffers against them (i.e., protective factors). Some programs are provided throughout a school district, others are carried out at or linked to targeted schools. Some are owned and operated by schools; some are owned by community agencies. The interventions may be offered to all students in a school, to those in specified grades, to those identified as "at risk," or to those in need of compensatory education. The activities may be implemented in regular or special education classrooms and may be geared to an entire class, groups, or individuals; or they may be designed as "pull out" programs for designated students. They encompass ecological, curricular, and clinically oriented activities designed to reduce problems, such as substance abuse, violence, teen pregnancy, school dropouts, and delinquency.

Although schools can use a wide range of people to help students, most school-owned and operated services are offered as part of what are called *pupil personnel services* or *support services*. Federal and state mandates tend to determine how many pupil services professionals are employed, and states regulate compliance with mandates. Governance of daily practice usually is centralized at the school district level. In large districts, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and other specialists may be organized into separate units. Such units overlap regular, special, and compensatory education.

In general, then, there is considerable activity. There is, however, no well-conceived and cohesive approach. This state of affairs is exacerbated by the specialized focus of the various organizational divisions in a district, such as curriculum and instruction, student support services, activity related to integration and compensatory education, special education, language acquisition, parent involvement, intergroup relations, and adult and career education. It is commonplace for such divisions to operate as relatively independent entities. Thus, although they usually must deal with the same common barriers to learning (e.g., poor

instruction, lack of parent involvement, violence and unsafe schools, inadequate support for student transitions), they tend to do so with little or no coordination, and sparse attention to moving toward integrated efforts. Furthermore, in every facet of school district operations, an unproductive separation often is manifested between those units focused on instruction and those concerned with addressing barriers to learning.

In addition, analyses of the situation consistently find that the majority of programs, services, and special projects designed to address barriers to student learning are viewed as supplementary (often referred to as auxiliary services), operate on an ad hoc basis, and are planned, implemented, and evaluated in a fragmented and piecemeal manner (Adelman and Taylor 1997; 2006; Dryfoos 1994; Gardner 2005). As a result, student support staff tend to function in relative isolation of each other and other stakeholders, with a great deal of the work oriented to discrete problems and with an overreliance on specialized individual and small group services. In some schools, a student identified as at risk for grade retention, dropout, and substance abuse may be assigned to three counseling programs operating independently. Such fragmentation and competition for sparse resources not only is costly, it works against developing cohesiveness and maximizing results (Adelman 1996a; Adelman and Taylor 1997; 1999).

Also, it should be stressed that, although a variety of student support activity exists in any school district, it is common knowledge that few schools come close to having enough resources to respond when confronted with a large number of students who are experiencing a wide range of factors interfering with learning and performance. Many schools offer only bare essentials. Too many schools cannot even meet basic needs. Primary prevention often is only a dream. Thus, at many schools, teachers simply do not have the supports they need when they identify students who are not functioning effectively. (For the remainder of this chapter, the term *learning supports* will be used to designate student/learning supports.)

SCHOOL-IMPROVEMENT PLANNING: WHAT'S MISSING?

Given the unsatisfactory status quo related to learning supports, one would expect this arena to be a major emphasis in school-improvement

planning guides. Analyses of such planning guides, however, make it clear how little attention is given to using this significant pool of resources more effectively (Center for Mental Health in Schools 2005a; 2005b). In particular, there is widespread failure to plan ways to enhance the ability of teachers and student support staff with respect to addressing barriers to learning and teaching, including better interventions for engaging and reengaging students in classroom learning. As a result, programs, services, and special projects providing learning supports at schools and district wide continue to be conducted in an ad hoc and piecemeal manner and are viewed as nonessential add-ons despite the considerable resources being expended (Adelman and Taylor 2006; Center for Mental Health in Schools 2005c).

Widespread recognition of the piecemeal nature of learning supports has produced some planning to enhance coordination. Better coordination is a good idea. But it does not address the fundamental systemic problem that school-owned student supports are marginalized in policy and practice. Thus, although there is a lot of observable activity in schools, the efforts are not a significant focus when it comes to planning school improvements. This is particularly ironic given the aura of dissatisfaction that surrounds current learning supports.

So, what is missing in school-improvement plans? We find no systemic focus on developing the type of comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated approaches necessary to address the many overlapping barriers to learning and development. School-improvement planners have ignored the need to use a unifying umbrella concept as a basis for (a) rethinking and restructuring the work of student support professionals, (b) redeploying existing resources for learning supports, and (c) weaving school and community resources together. As a result, they have deemphasized the potential role such improvements can play both in helping teachers enhance student engagement and reengagement in classroom learning and in establishing the type of caring climate in classrooms and schoolwide that promotes progress and well-being.

A related gap in school-improvement planning is how little of on-the-job education focuses on improving classroom and schoolwide approaches for dealing effectively with mild-to-moderate behavior, learning, and emotional problems. This becomes clearly evident in analyses of how resources for inservice are used in building the capacity of

teachers, student support staff, administrators, paraprofessionals, aides, and volunteers.

In short, most school-improvement plans currently pay little attention to substantially enhancing the way schools provide learning supports. At best, most reformers have offered the notions of establishing family resource centers and full-service schools to link community resources to schools and enhance coordination of services (Dryfoos 1994). Connecting school and community resources is another good idea. But community involvement at schools also is a marginalized matter, and when not done properly, it compounds the problems of fragmentation and counterproductive competition. These problems arise when the focus is primarily on coordinating community services and collocating them at schools. Available evidence makes it clear that much more fundamental, systemic changes are needed to braid resources and integrate them with the ongoing efforts of school staff (Gardner 2005).

NEEDED: A POLICY SHIFT AND A CONTINUUM OF INTEGRATED SCHOOL–COMMUNITY INTERVENTION SYSTEMS

Limited efficacy seems inevitable as long as interventions are carried out in a chaotic fashion. Some policy makers have come to appreciate the relationship between limited intervention efficacy and the way learning supports are provided. For the most part, however, reforms have focused on a symptom—fragmentation. This bypasses the underlying systemic issue, namely that addressing barriers to learning and teaching remains a marginalized aspect of policy and practice.

Unfortunately, concern about the marginalization is not even on the radar screen of most policy makers. This is reflected not only in school-improvement planning, but also in consolidated plans and certification reviews and the lack of efforts to map, analyze, and rethink how resources for learning supports are allocated. As long as educational decision makers ignore the need to make fundamental systemic changes that end the marginalization, it is unlikely that the problem of fragmentation will be resolved effectively, and the potential benefits of learning supports for large numbers of children and adolescents will be unfulfilled.

TOWARD ENDING THE MARGINALIZATION OF LEARNING SUPPORTS

Analyses by our research group indicate that school reform is currently dominated by a two-component systemic model (Adelman 1995; 1996a; 1996b; Adelman and Taylor 1994; 1997; 1998; Center for Mental Health in Schools 1996; 1997). That is, the main interest thrust is on improving instruction and school management. Although these two facets obviously are essential, ending the marginalization of efforts to effectively address barriers to learning and teaching requires establishing a third component as a primary, essential, complementary, and overlapping facet of transforming the educational system (see figure 4.1).

As can be seen in figure 4.1, we designate the component to address barriers to learning as an *enabling component*; others who have adopted it use the term *learning supports component*. This third component not only provides a basis for combating marginalization, it establishes a focal point for developing a comprehensive learning supports framework to guide systemic changes. Its usefulness for these purposes is evidenced in its adoption by various states and localities around the country (Center for Mental Health in Schools 2005d).

TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM OF LEARNING SUPPORTS

Problems experienced by students generally are complex in terms of cause and needed intervention. Therefore, in designing learning supports, school and community leaders must work together to develop a high functioning, comprehensive, and multifaceted system.

How comprehensive and multifaceted? As illustrated in figure 4.2, the desired interventions can be conceived along a continuum ranging from a broad-based emphasis on promoting healthy development and preventing problems (both of which include a focus on wellness or competence enhancement) through approaches for responding to problems early-after-onset and extending on to narrowly focused treatments for severe or chronic problems. Not only does the continuum span the concepts of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention, but it can

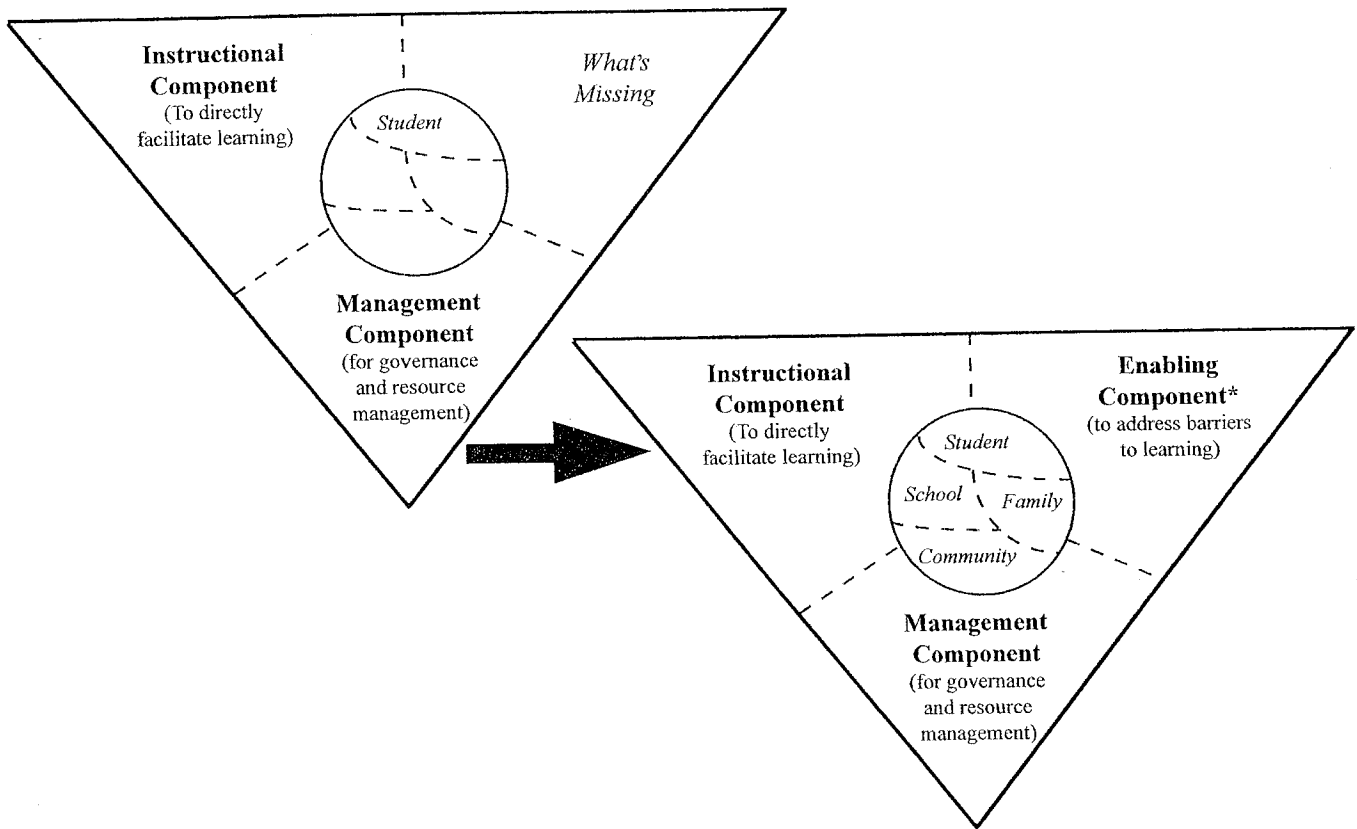


Figure 4.1. Moving from a two- to a three-component model for school improvement

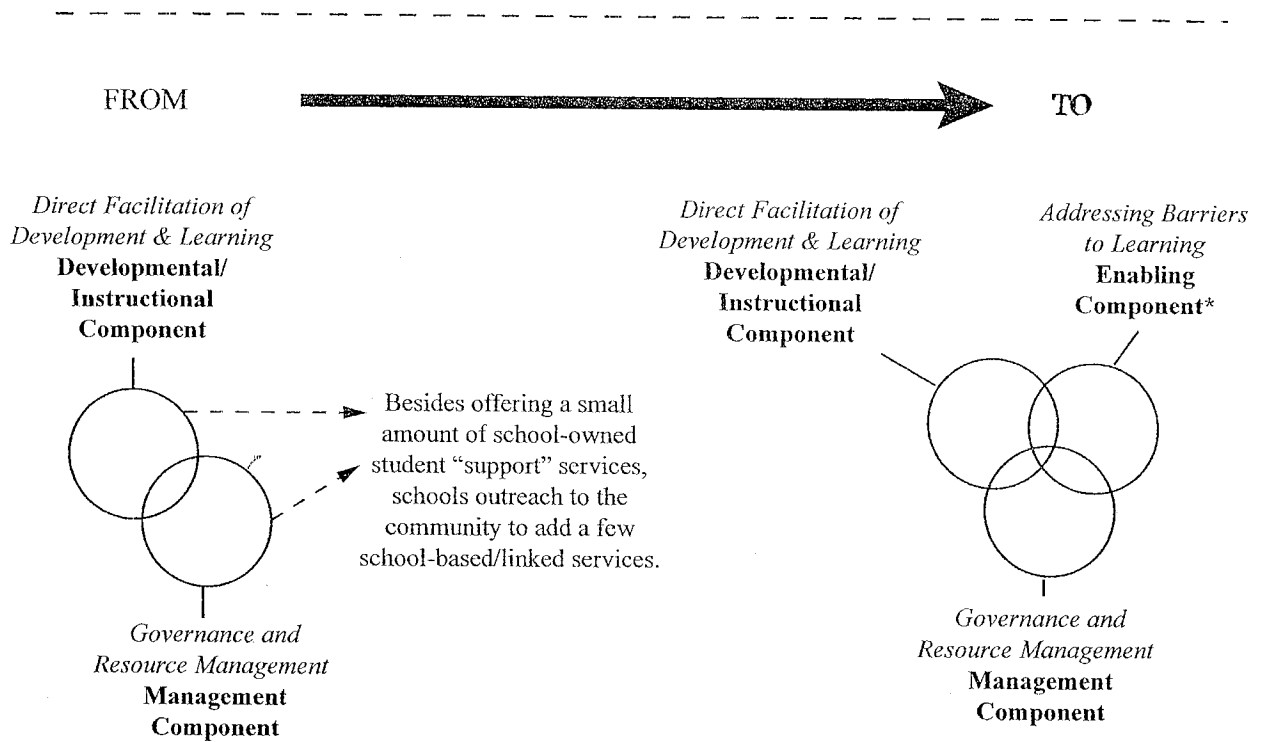
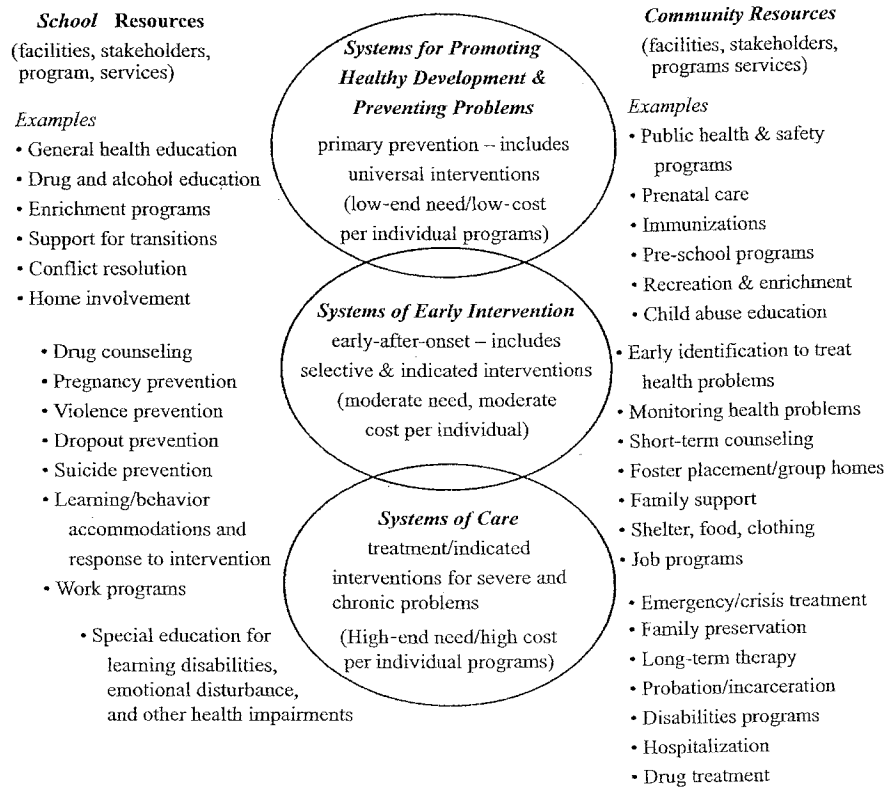


Figure 4.1. (continued)



Systemic collaboration* is essential to establish interprogram connections on a daily basis and over time to ensure seamless intervention within each system and among *systems of prevention, systems of early intervention, and systems of care.*

*Such collaboration involves horizontal and vertical restructuring of programs and services

a) within jurisdictions, school districts, and community agencies (e.g., among departments, divisions, units, schools, clusters of schools)

b) between jurisdictions, school and community agencies, public and private sectors; among schools; among community agencies

Figure 4.2.

also incorporate a holistic and developmental emphasis that envelops individuals, families, and the contexts in which they live, work, and play. The continuum also provides a framework for adhering to the principle of using the least restrictive and unintrusive forms of intervention required to appropriately respond to problems and accommodate diversity.

Moreover, given the likelihood that many problems are not discrete, the continuum can be designed to address root causes, thereby minimizing tendencies to develop separate programs for each observed problem. In turn, this enables better coordination and integration of resources which can increase impact and cost effectiveness. Ultimately, as indicated in figure 4.2, the continuum can evolve into a totally integrated system by enhancing the way the subsystems of intervention at each level are connected. Such connections may involve horizontal and vertical restructuring of programs and services (a) within jurisdictions, school districts, and community agencies and (b) between jurisdictions, school and community agencies, public and private sectors, among clusters of schools, and among a wide range of community resources.

As graphically illustrated by the tapering of the three levels of intervention in figure 4.2, development of a fully integrated system is meant to reduce the number of individuals who require selected and indicated supports. That is, the aim in developing such a comprehensive approach is to prevent the majority of problems, deal with another significant segment as soon after problem onset as is feasible, and end up with relatively few needing specialized assistance and other intensive and costly interventions.

OPERATIONALIZING THE CONTINUUM FOR SCHOOL-IMPROVEMENT PLANNING: REFRAMING HOW SCHOOLS ADDRESS BARRIERS TO LEARNING

An additional framework helps to operationalize the concept of an enabling or learning supports component (see figure 4.1) in ways that coalesce and enhance programs to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. A crucial matter is defining what the entire school must do to enable all students to learn and all teachers to teach effectively. Schoolwide approaches to address barriers to learning

are especially important in which large numbers of students are affected and at any school that is not yet paying adequate attention to considerations related to equity and diversity. Leaving no child behind requires addressing the problems of the many who are not benefiting from instructional reforms.

Various pioneering efforts have operationalized such an enabling component into six programmatic arenas. We refer to these six arenas as the component's curriculum or content (Adelman 1996b; Adelman and Taylor 1998). This curriculum encompasses programs to (1) enhance classroom-based efforts to enable learning; (2) respond to and prevent crises; (3) support transitions; (4) increase home involvement in schooling; (5) outreach to develop greater community involvement and support; and (6) provide prescribed student and family assistance (see Exhibit 1 at the end of this chapter).

Combining the six content arenas with the continuum of interventions illustrated in figure 4.2 provides a full intervention picture to guide school-improvement planning in developing a system of learning supports. The resulting matrix is also shown in figure 4.2. This matrix creates a unifying umbrella framework to aid in rethinking the daily work of all staff who provide learning supports. It also facilitates mapping and analyzing the current scope and content of how a school, a group of schools (e.g., a feeder pattern), and a school district address barriers to learning and teaching.

GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE REQUIRES ANOTHER TYPE OF CONCERN ABOUT SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Those who set out to improve schools and schooling across a district are confronted with two enormous tasks. The first is to develop prototypes; the second involves large-scale replication. One without the other is insufficient. Yet considerably more attention is paid to developing and validating prototypes than to delineating and testing systemic change processes required for sustainability, replication, and scale-up (Elmore 2004; Fullan 2005; Hargreaves and Fink 2000). For example, most innovations are developed as pilots, demonstrations, or special projects at one or a few schools in a district. These prototypes are assigned special

budget allocations for a period usually ranging from three to five years. Often the stated intent is not only to sustain but eventually to diffuse the prototype throughout the district. But the reality is that most prototypes disappear after the special period of funding ends. This has led some researchers to describe the failure to sustain and take prototypes to scale as “projectitis” and to an increased focus on dealing with the problem (Adelman and Taylor 2003).

School improvement obviously needs to begin with a clear framework and map for what changes are to be made. It should be equally evident that a framework and map is needed for how to get from here to there. And in both cases, the work requires strong leadership and adequate resources to build capacity for systemic change and looks to available research for guidance (Sarason 1996; Taylor, Nelson, and Adelman 1999; Vander Ark, 2002).

Elsewhere, we have discussed in some detail a basic framework highlighting how major elements involved in designing school improvements are logically connected to considerations about designing systemic change (Center for Mental Health in Schools 2005e). Figure 4.3 outlines the framework. As can be seen in figure 4.3, the same elements can be used to frame key design concerns related to school improvement and systemic change, and each is intimately linked to the other. The elements are conceived as encompassing

- The vision, aims, and underlying rationale for what follows,
- The resources needed to do the work,
- The general functions, major tasks, activities, and phases that must be pursued,
- The infrastructure and strategies needed to carry out the functions, tasks, and activities, and
- The positive and negative results that emerge.

Strategic planning for school improvement should account for each of the elements outlined in figure 4.3, first with respect to prototypes for ensuring that all the students have an equal opportunity to succeed in school and then with respect to how schools will accomplish essential changes. At the district level, the need is for a strategic plan that clarifies how the district will facilitate replication and scale-up of prototype practices.

Key considerations with respect to both (a) desired school improvements and (b) "getting from here to there" (e.g., systemic changes):

- > What is the vision, long-term aims, and underlying rationale?
- > What are the existing resources that might be (re)deployed and woven together to make good progress toward the vision?
- > What general functions, major tasks, activities, and phases need to be implemented?
- > What infrastructure and strategies are needed to carry out the functions, tasks, and activities?
- > What short-term indicators will be used as process benchmarks, what intermediate outcomes will indicate progress toward long-range aims, and how will negative outcomes be identified?

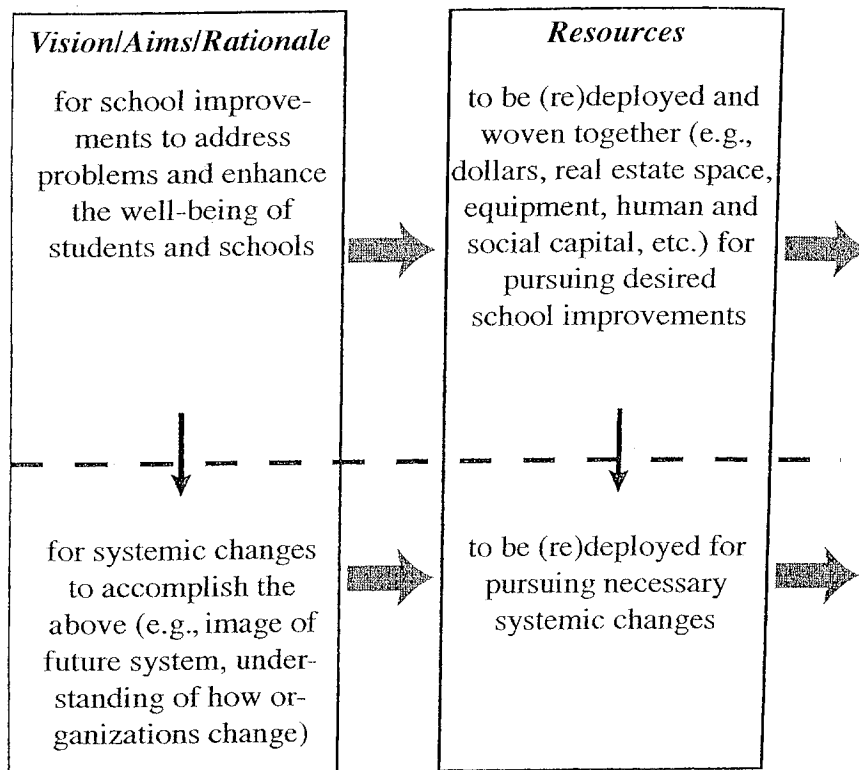


Figure 4.3. Linking logic models for designing school improvement and systemic change

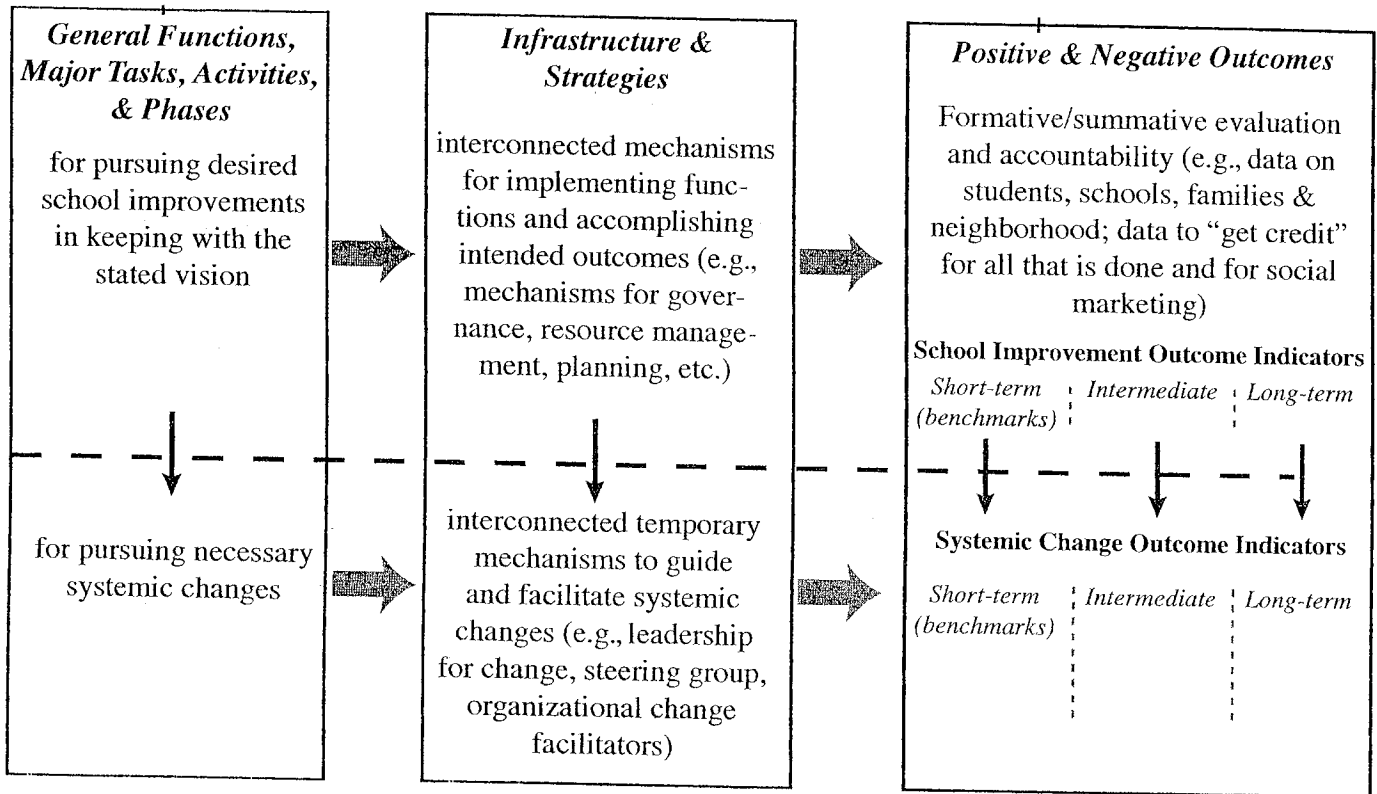


Figure 4.3. (continued)

SUMMARY

Prevailing school reform processes and capacity building (including pre-service and in-service staff development) have not dealt effectively with the marginalization of learning supports. Thus, it is not surprising that so many schools continue to struggle with enhancing student progress and closing the achievement gap. The simple psychometric reality is that in schools where students encounter major barriers to learning, test score averages are unlikely to increase much until learning support programs are rethought and redesigned.

Every school-improvement plan must meet the challenge by ensuring it focuses on development of a comprehensive system of learning supports for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Development of such a system requires shifts in prevailing policy and new frameworks for practice. In addition, for significant prototype development and systemic change to occur, policy and program commitments must be demonstrated through effective allocation and (re)deployment of resources to facilitate organizational and operational changes. That is, finances, personnel, time, space, equipment, and other essential resources must be made available, organized, and used in ways that adequately operationalize policy and promising practices. This includes ensuring sufficient resources to develop an effective structural foundation for prototype development, systemic changes, sustainability, and ongoing capacity building. To do less is to undermine substantive systemic change and perpetuate an unsatisfactory status quo.

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Exhibit I Content Areas for a Component to Address Barriers to Learning

(1) Classroom-based approaches encompass

- Opening the classroom door to bring available supports in (e.g., peer tutors, volunteers, aids trained to work with students-in-need; resource teachers and student support staff work in the classroom as part of the teaching team).
- Redesigning classroom practices to enhance teacher capability to prevent and handle problems and reduce need for out of class referrals (e.g., personalized instruction; special assistance as necessary; developing small group and independent learning options; reducing negative interactions and overreliance on social control; expanding the range of curricular and instructional options and choices; systematic use of prereferral interventions).
- Enhancing and personalizing professional development (e.g., creating a learning community for teachers; ensuring opportunities to learn through coteaching, team teaching, and mentoring; teaching intrinsic motivation concepts and their application to schooling).
- Curricular enrichment and adjunct programs (e.g., varied enrichment activities that are not tied to reinforcement schedules; visiting scholars from the community).
- Classroom and schoolwide approaches used to create and maintain a caring and supportive climate.
- Emphasis at all times is on enhancing students cognition and affect related to competence, self-determination, and relatedness to others at school and reducing threats to such cognition and affect.

(2) Crisis assistance and revention encompasses

- Ensuring immediate assistance in emergencies so students can resume learning.
- Providing follow-up care as necessary (e.g., brief and longer-term monitoring).

- Forming a school-focused crisis team to formulate a response plan and take leadership for developing prevention programs.
- Mobilizing staff, students, and families to anticipate response plans and recovery efforts.
- Creating a caring and safe learning environment (e.g., developing systems to promote healthy development and prevent problems; bullying and harassment abatement programs).
- Working with neighborhood schools and community to integrate planning for response and prevention.
- Capacity building to enhance crisis response and prevention (e.g., staff and stakeholder development, enhancing a caring and safe learning environment).

(3) Support for transitions encompasses

- Welcoming and social support programs for newcomers (e.g., welcoming signs, materials, and initial receptions; peer buddy programs for students, families, staff, volunteers).
- Daily transition programs for (e.g., before school, breaks, lunch, after school).
- Articulation programs (e.g., grade to grade—new classrooms, new teachers; elementary to middle school; middle to high school; in and out of special education programs).
- Summer or intersession programs (e.g., catch-up, recreation, and enrichment programs).
- School-to-career/higher education (e.g., counseling, pathway, and mentor programs; broad involvement of stakeholders in planning for transitions; students, staff, home, police, faith groups, recreation, business, higher education).
- Broad involvement of stakeholders in planning for transitions (e.g., students, staff, home, police, faith groups, recreation, business, higher education).
- Capacity building to enhance transition programs and activities.

(4) Home involvement in schooling encompasses

- Addressing specific support and learning needs of family (e.g., support services for those in the home to assist in addressing

basic survival needs and obligations to the children; adult education classes to enhance literacy, job skills, English-as-a-second language, citizenship preparation).

- Improving mechanisms for communication and connecting school and home (e.g., opportunities at school for family networking and mutual support, learning, recreation, enrichment, and for family members to receive special assistance and to volunteer to help; phone calls or e-mail from teacher and other staff with good news; frequent and balanced conferences—student-led when feasible; outreach to attract hard-to-reach families—including student dropouts).
- Involving homes in student decision making (e.g., families prepared for involvement in program planning and problem solving).
- Enhancing home support for learning and development (e.g., family literacy; family homework projects; family field trips)
- Recruiting families to strengthen school and community (e.g., volunteers to welcome and support new families and help in various capacities; families prepared for involvement in school governance).
- Capacity building to enhance home involvement.

(5) Community outreach for involvement and support encompasses

- Planning and implementing outreach to recruit a wide range of community resources (e.g., public and private agencies; colleges and universities; local residents; artists and cultural institutions, businesses and professional organizations; service, volunteer, and faith-based organizations; community policy and decision makers).
- Systems to recruit, screen, prepare, and maintain community resource involvement (e.g., mechanisms to orient and welcome, enhance the volunteer pool, maintain current involvements, enhance a sense of community).
- Reaching out to students and families who do not come to school regularly—including truants and dropouts.
- Connecting school and community efforts to promote child and youth development and a sense of community.

- Capacity building to enhance community involvement and support (e.g., policies and mechanisms to enhance and sustain school-community involvement, staff/stakeholder development on the value of community involvement, “social marketing”).

(6) Student and family assistance encompasses

- Providing extra support as soon as a need is recognized and doing so in the least disruptive ways (e.g., prereferral interventions in classrooms; problem-solving conferences with parents; open access to school, district, and community support programs).
- Timely referral interventions for students and families with problems based on response to extra support (e.g., identification/screening processes, assessment, referrals, and follow-up—school based, school linked).
- Enhancing access to direct interventions for health, mental health, and economic assistance (e.g., school-based, school-linked, and community-based programs and services).
- Care monitoring, management, information sharing, and follow-up assessment to coordinate individual interventions and check whether referrals and services are adequate and effective.
- Mechanisms for *resource* coordination and integration to avoid duplication, fill gaps, garner economies of scale, and enhance effectiveness (e.g., braiding resources from school-based and linked interveners, feeder pattern/family of schools, community-based programs; linking with community providers to fill gaps).
- Enhancing stakeholder awareness of programs and services.
- Capacity building to enhance systems, programs, and services for student and family assistance.